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ABSTRACT

At Northport High School, New York, the subject of human rights is dealt with in a tenth grade European Cultures Studies course. The ten week unit treats the concept of human rights as well as historical and current cases focusing on basic liberties. As students study the individual cases involving human rights, they delve into the political and social background of the country involved. Students compare similar situations in history and literature and further explore issues in small group discussions of readings. Each student is required to write a thought or reaction paper as the culminating unit activity. To add a personal experience dimension to the curriculum, extensive use is made of resource speakers including political and governmental experts, representatives from social action and religious groups, and local teachers. Student involvement takes the form of school-wide programs and displays, taped interviews and correspondence with experts in the field, participation in local social action projects, newspaper writing, and fund raising. Students are evaluated by traditional testing methods as well as by individual assessment of interest and motivation level. (Author/KSM)

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A HUMAN RIGHTS CURRICULUM

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PROFILES OF PROMISE are descriptive brochures that highlight innovative social studies and social education practices which teachers and administrators can easily adapt to their own classrooms or schools.

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What do you teach high school students about human rights? Do you deal directly with issues of individual liberties? Do you talk in hypotheticals or in realities? Do you discuss historical or current cases? What resource materials do you use?

At Northport High School, Northport, New York, the subject of human rights is dealt with in a specially designed unit, entitled Human Rights. The unit is part of the tenth grade European Culture Studies course, and was designed by Howard Blue. For ten weeks students study the concept of human rights as well as historical and current cases focusing on basic liberties. At the conclusion of the unit students are presented opportunities to become personally involved in specific issues of individual rights.

A HUMAN RIGHTS CURRICULUM

Northport students begin their study by examining their personal views of basic human rights. Blue asks students to list all the rights they believe essential to a good life. The students then study the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and compare the rights named there with their own list. Some of the concepts stated by the students are the same as those in the Declaration; however, according to Blue, some concepts such as "the right to belong to a free trade union" are rarely expressed by the students, while concerns more immediate to young people, such as "the right to smoke and drink" are frequently mentioned. After this activity one student wrote, "I have to admit this openly. I never knew there was such a thing as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Issues of human rights are then set in an historical context as students read *Antigone: A Conflict Between Law and Conscience.* (Wallbank and Mitchell, eds., 1969) In class discussions students explore the broad issue of human versus divine law as they reflect on Antigone's conflict with King Creon about the burial of her brother's body. The class applies the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights to Antigone's situation. Because the case is so clear and yet so remote in time, the issues stand out sharply, and most students recognize the basic injustice of the situation.

The next class reading and discussion focuses on *Conflict of Values: The Early Christian Martyrs.* (Oliver and Newmann, 1967) After studying the dilemma of the early Christians, students are asked to consider the analogy between the Christian/Roman conflict and the contemporary conflict between our own government and Jehovah's Witnesses or Black Muslims who refuse to salute the American flag.

Moving to more recent cases, students study the situation of Silva Zalmanson, a Jewish Soviet citizen who was first denied permission by the Soviet government to emigrate to Israel, and then later, with her husband and a group of Jews, was arrested at the Leningrad airport and accused of attempting to hijack an airplane. The case is studied from two points of view: that described in *S.O.S. Soviet Jewry*, a newspaper published by the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and the version presented in *Soviet Jews: Fact and Fiction*, a pamphlet distributed by the Soviet embassy. The readings often lead to a discussion of what conditions, if any, justify violence.

Blue reports that issues of this kind are difficult for many students. American students generally find it easier to agree that a person in a communist state has a moral right to break an unjust law, than to agree that an American should obey his conscience when it conflicts with the law. One boy became upset about the whole study of human rights and left a quotation on the teacher's desk which read, "Conscience is but a word that cowards first devised to keep the strong in awe."

To help students realize the immediate, world-wide implications of human rights violations, Blue provides the students with several current case histories of persons being held in prisons for their political or religious beliefs. Information for these case histories is obtained from material published by Amnesty International.

Amnesty International is a non-profit, international organization devoted to assisting people who are being held prisoner because of political or religious beliefs. Founded in Europe in 1961, Amnesty International now has over 70 chapters in the United States. When information on a prisoner

of conscience is received by the organization, the referral is verified and organization members are notified of the prisoner's situation. The members attempt to secure the release of the prisoner through a postcard and letter campaign to officials of the government concerned. To avoid domestic political repercussions, members may not pressure officials of their own government.

As students study the individual cases from Amnesty International, is necessary for them to delve into the political and social background of the country in which the prisoners are being held. For example, in studying the case of Jose Luis Prieto Rodriguez, who was imprisoned in Spain for being a conscientious objector, it was necessary for students to research the Spanish law which relates to religious freedom. They also explored the political atmosphere of Spain and the religious situation of the country.

Blue's students have studied cases from countries all over the world: Czechoslovakia, U.S.S.R., Nepal, Chad, Sierra Leone, and the United States. Students usually focus on two or three cases during the unit. In addition to the necessary political and religious background of the country, students often study the country's monetary system, social mores, geography, and language. In response to this part of the unit one student wrote, "I learned a lot about world situations. I was surprised how ignorant I was about the countries--the way they govern themselves. I really didn't know what a fascist government was, what a military coup was, and many other things."

As these cases are studied, students are encouraged to compare them with the situations of Antigone and the early Christians. By comparing past and present, and group and individual cases, students begin to develop an awareness of the concepts involved in basic human rights. The issues are further explored in small group discussions of readings such as *The Diary of Ann Frank* (Goodrich and Hackett, 1956), *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Solzhenitsyn, 1970), and *My Testimony* (Marchenko, 1971). Considerable discussion is elicited from a class viewing of *The Confession*, a Costa Gavras film.

Each student is required to write a thought or reaction paper as the culminating activity for the Human Rights unit. Students are presented several topic suggestions such as this one:

> In the last 25 years, Indonesia, the United States, Greece, and other countries have imprisoned people for belonging to a Communist Party. A common justification has been that many or most Communist parties favor the violent overthrow of non-Communist governments. Thus, it is argued, Communists should be imprisoned before they have an opportunity to overthrow a government. In an essay of 1-2 pages, tell why you agree or disagree with the above argument.

USING RESOURCE SPEAKERS

To add the dimension of personal experience to the curriculum, Blue makes extensive use of resource speakers in his social studies classes, scheduling a speaker every two to three weeks. While speakers are used throughout the year, they are especially meaningful to the Human Rights unit. Blue and his fellow teacher, Paul Lissandrello, wrote an article based on their experiences entitled "Using Resource Speakers in the Classroom" for the *Social Science Record* (Autumn 1973).

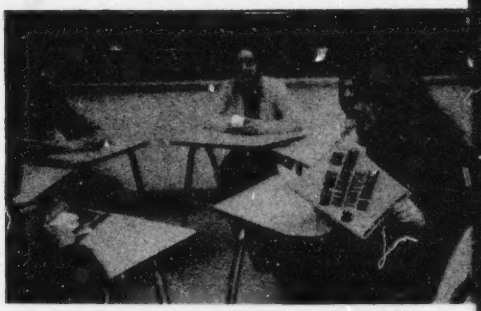
Speakers focusing on human rights issues are drawn from many sources. Political speakers are frequently invited to discuss specific issues; these include candidates for office as well as elected officials. The teachers found speakers to be more responsive to invitations when informed there would be press coverage of their appearance.

Because of the international focus of the students' human rights study, representatives from foreign countries have also been invited to speak to the students. One semester a British diplomat was invited to speak to the class on the Northern Ireland question. The British representative was followed by a United Nations vice council from the Republic of Ireland representing the Irish point of view. The discussion following each speaker was lively, causing one student to remark, "I sort of favored the Irish, but each side has good points to bring up. This issue isn't simple."

In addition to the political and governmental speakers, teachers have invited representatives from many social action groups such as Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, Amnesty International, American Civil Liberties Union, Fortune Society (a prison reform group), and National Organization for Women. Less reform-oriented groups such as the American Legion have also provided speakers. Religious spokesmen often deal with issues of fundamental rights. Among the more unusual religious speakers at Northport have been representatives from Jehovah's Witnesses, young people from the Jesus movement, and two young men from an Episcopalian friary. In choosing speakers, the teachers have attempted to present a fair balance of all issues.

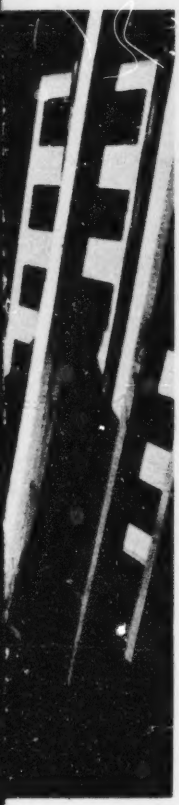
Blue and Lissandrello have also been alert to the availability of speakers in their own midst. The faculty member who served as a volunteer draft counselor, the elderly teacher aide who worked aboard a German ship in World War I, the principal and secretary who emigrated to America, a teacher who served in the Peace Corps, and a student's father who recently visited mainland China--all provided insightful, personal dimensions to questions of basic human rights.

To use speakers to the best advantage, students are carefully prepared for their appearances. Usually a preparatory discussion is held by the students

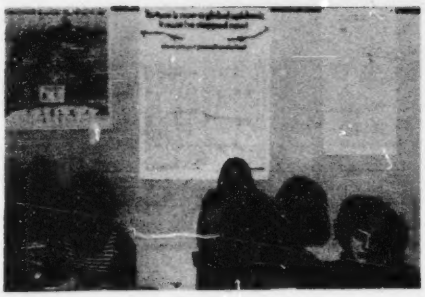


Small group explores cases involving human rights issues. (Phto by Toscano)

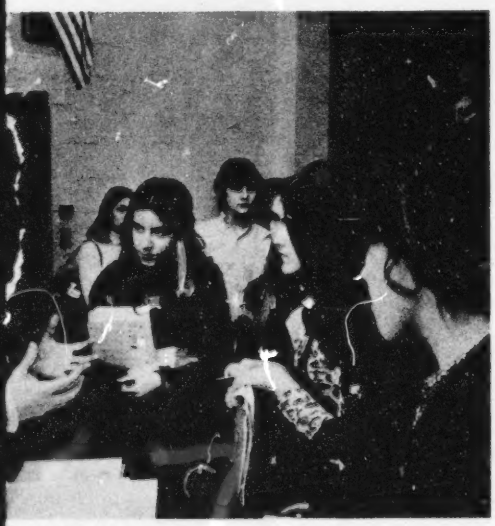
Students gather after class for further discussion with guest speaker, Cyril Lovitt, deputy counsel general of the United Kingdom. (Photo by Newsday, 1972)



Student sitting in a mock prison cell, one of the displays at the commemoration program. (Photo by Northport Observer, 1973)



Classroom displays call attention to current cases.



the day before a guest speaks. For example, before the British and Irish representatives spoke, the class studied the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act. Students were ready with pointed questions about the legislation.

Blue and Lissandrello have found it useful to consult with the speakers before their appearances to explain specifically what they wish the guests to discuss. Sometimes speakers wish to evangelize rather than present informative material, and a prior discussion with the speaker can help prevent that problem. Speakers are also told what kind of questions students may ask, thus enabling them to gather information or material which might be helpful in answering the questions.

Bringing people with minority or controversial views into the classroom as speakers has potential dangers. In anticipation of any problems which might arise, Northport teachers have made it a policy to inform the school administration of each speaker's appearance and to receive approval for his visit; no speaker has been refused. Teachers have also invited skeptical people, including parents, to attend sessions and sit in on discussions.

The guest speakers have provided students with a wide variety of views on questions of individual liberties.

GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED

Believing that human rights issues will become more meaningful if students become personally involved in specific questions, Blue provides opportunities for personal commitment. The kinds of activities and levels of commitment are varied to appeal to all students. Students are not required to participate in any of the activities.

On December 10, 1973, students in the Human Rights Unit held a program and display in the central lobby of Northport High School to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of the displays was a mock prison cell in which a student confined herself to symbolize the prisoners of conscience held throughout the world. The local press was invited to the commemoration and gave the event media coverage.

Various students have taped interviews with people who are personally involved in issues of basic rights. Five students interviewed a psychiatrist who lobbied at the meeting of the World Congress of Psychiatrists in Mexico City a few years ago on behalf of a resolution condemning Soviet use of mental institutions to incarcerate political dissidents. Recently, two sophomores interviewed a cousin of Ann Frank who lives in the Northport area. This semester students will interview a local resident whose family has experienced political persecution in Brazil. Copies of these taped interviews are kept in the school's library listening center.

Northport students also have had opportunities to participate in several Amnesty International projects. After the class has studied the case histories of prisoners of conscience provided by Amnesty International, individual students may participate in the postcard campaigns sponsored by the organization. A student chooses the prisoner or prisoners he wishes to help, then writes courteously worded postcards to selected officials of the government holding the person, requesting his release.

Often students receive no reply to their correspondence nor any information on the prisoner with whom they are concerned. However, on at least one occasion, a prisoner for whom the students worked has been released. A student who participated in that card campaign described the experience, "I wrote for the release of Dr. Helga Petschik, and she was recently released. Whether or not my letter helped, it made me feel good knowing that I might have helped, even a little."

Some students choose to direct their concern for political prisoners to local newspapers. Several students have written letters to the media explaining the situations of certain prisoners of conscience. These letters generally appear in the newspaper and give students a more direct reward for their effort than they might get from writing postcards.

After a visit from the executive director of Amnesty International, Northport students organized the first high school chapter of the organization in the United States. The 40-plus members of the organization have continued to conduct postcard campaigns for selected prisoners and each year adopt three prisoners to whom they give special assistance. In some instances the students have raised money to help the prisoner's family until his release. The group also attempts to meet with embassy officials or United Nations representatives of the involved country, to personally request the prisoner's release.

Because of their involvement with specific cases and with issues of human rights in general, students have been asked to speak on the subject. Two years ago, three sophomores were interviewed on a local college radio station about their work. Several others were interviewed for a broadcast over Radio Free Europe in which they described their class and their personal involvement with prisoners of conscience.

All of the activities in which students participate have served to make issues of human rights more meaningful to the students, but a study such as Human Rights is difficult to evaluate. Blue uses traditional testing methods to assess the students' completion of the assigned reading materials. However, he also uses other measures to assess student interest and motivation levels. These measures may include the number of postcards or letters written, number of individual field trips taken, and number of interviews completed. These assessments are taken into consideration in the final evaluation. Students receive traditional grades for their work in the

course.

STUDENT REACTION

What a student gains from the Human Rights Unit is highly personal, depending to a great extent on his background, maturity, and level of commitment. However, in comments written by the students after completing the course, two kinds of reactions seem to dominate their statements.

First, many students acknowledged that this was the first time they had given any thought to questions of human rights. Two students wrote:

> I never really thought about human rights before I had this course. But studying about prisoners such as Daniel Cabrita, Anatoly Marchenko, and Jose Prieto really opened up my eyes to the problems.

> I thought I knew all about the situation in the U.S.S.R., but after reading *My Testimony* by Anatoly Marchenko, I realized how little I knew.

A second response came from students who participated in the personal involvement opportunities offered within the unit. For these students, the experience seemed to open new avenues of thought about the citizen's role in his world. Several students, like the following writer, left the course convinced of the need to become personally involved in situations which challenge basic concepts of individual liberties.

> Before we began this study I didn't think there was anything one individual could do to right the wrongs that had been done. But I've learned that a small group was able to accomplish something because we worked with many others toward a common goal. It's very fulfilling to know that your voice can be heard.

ERIC DOCUMENTS

ED 080 420 - **A Guide to Human Rights Education.** Bulletin 43. 152 pp. MF-$.65. Available from National Council for the Social Studies, 1201 Sixteenth St., N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036, $2.25. Background information and teaching suggestions are offered in this guide for implementing human rights ideas in existing social studies curricula at the elementary and secondary grade levels.

ED 078 322 - **Understanding Intergroup Relations.** 32 pp. MF-$.65, Hardcopy available from National Education Association, 1201 Sixteenth St., N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036. Various aspects of intergroup relations and how to teach concepts of intergroup relations in the classroom are presented.

ED 073 011 - **Intergroup Relations Curriculum.** Program Report. 29 pp. MF-$.65, HC-$3.29. This is a description of a one-year, elementary social studies program for use as the basis of a curriculum or to supplement an existing program. The long-term goal is for students to develop democratic human relations.

ED 069 012 - **Friendship Patterns in Multi-Cultural Group: International Communication at the Personal level.** 28 pp. MF-$.65, HC-$3.29. This paper examines the process of interpersonal communication across cultural boundaries, through a combination of the cross-cultural approach and the interpersonal approach.

For further information, write:

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Materials for the Human Rights Unit:

Goodrich, Frances and Albert Hackett. **Diary of Anne Frank.** Westminster, Md.: Random House, Inc., 1956.

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